

Witchhunt of Sri Lankan newspaper for allegedly breaching “national security”

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The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Sri Lankan police last Monday questioned Lasanthe Wickrematunga, editor of the *Sunday Leader*, for two hours over spurious allegations that his weekly newspaper was “jeopardising the security of the country.”

The police investigation follows the publication on March 5 of an article entitled “The Tiger report on paramilitaries”, which was based on a document submitted during negotiations last month in Geneva between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The purpose of the lengthy document was to demonstrate that the Sri Lankan military had been colluding with paramilitary militia groups in attacking the LTTE—in breach of the current ceasefire.

The article provoked a vicious witchhunt by Sinhala extremists, including Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), backed by the state media and the military hierarchy. JVP and JHU leaders have been demanding that President Mahinda Rajapakse invoke emergency powers to impose press censorship in the name of safeguarding “national security.”

Even on the face of it, the allegations against the *Sunday Leader* are absurd. The newspaper did no more than publish information, which was presented in Geneva by the LTTE itself. How publishing details provided by “the enemy” constitutes a threat to national security, none of the chauvinist critics of the *Sunday Leader* have explained.

The article included charts of the command structure of four armed Tamil paramilitaries, including the Karuna group, along with the alias and, in some cases, the real name and rank of their Sri Lankan military contacts. It also cited alleged cases in which

paramilitary members dressed in army uniform were on military checkpoints and in which militiamen operated from army bases.

The real reason why the article produced such a reaction was that it undercut the military’s repeated denials, in the face of mounting evidence, of any involvement in attacks on the LTTE. Sections of the military top brass, along with the JVP and JHU, have been hostile to the ceasefire since it was signed in February 2002 and have been engaged in a series of provocations to undermine it. Military intelligence in particular has a long history of using anti-LTTE paramilitaries as its proxies.

The *Sunday Leader* has close connections to the right-wing United National Party (UNP). It reflects the views of the country’s corporate elite, which is pushing for a negotiated end to the war as the means of pressing ahead with market reform measures and opening up the island to foreign investment. The JVP and JHU, on the other hand, voice the entrenched interests of sections of business, the military, the Buddhist hierarchy and state bureaucracy that are hostile to any powersharing arrangement with the Tamil ruling elite.

The attack on the *Sunday Leader* is an attempt to intimidate and gag any opposition to the bellicose campaign being waged by the JVP and JHU for a wholesale revision of the ceasefire agreement. As its sponsors know, this demand, which has already been rejected by the LTTE, threatens to undermine negotiations in Geneva and to accelerate a slide back to civil war.

On the same day the *Sunday Leader* article appeared, state-owned television channels broadcast comments from JVP and JHU leaders, as well as a military spokesman, condemning its publication and called for press censorship. The following day, the government

information department rejected “allegations” of any relationship between the security forces and the paramilitaries, and warned the media to refrain from publishing items that could “endanger national security.”

On March 7, JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa issued a special statement in parliament declaring that his party “respects the motherland more than media freedom.” Weerawansa, who in the past indulged in empty anti-imperialist denunciations, cited the Bush administration’s Patriot Act, with its wholesale attack on democratic rights, as the model for Sri Lanka. “Even that country [the US]... has taken steps to control every other thing on the basis of its national ambitions,” he said.

Responding to Weerawansa, Media Minister Anura Priya Dharshana Yapa said that the government’s attention had already been drawn to the relevant news item, which could have “serious repercussions on national security”. He promised that the government would conduct “an investigation.”

Like the Bush administration, the so-called Marxists of the JVP have their own bogus “war on terrorism”. They are seeking to whip up a climate of anti-LTTE hysteria to attack democratic rights and to justify tearing up the ceasefire agreement and a return to war. In an interview in *Irida Divayina*, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe declared: “Is it correct to behave like this in a country at war? In other countries [at war], they [the media] are under martial law and are not allowed to write such things.”

The JVP is making common cause with the military top brass, who would also like to see press censorship of their activities, particularly their provocative attempts to undermine the ceasefire. The latest JVP newspaper *Lanka* published comments from two ex-army chiefs, Hamilton Wanasinghe and Lionel Balagalle, and quoted army spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe as saying: “Because of this [article], there is a grave threat to the lives of army officers and the government should act on this [newspaper].”

Since the civil war broke out in 1983, successive Sri Lankan governments, the military and the police have repeatedly used threats or outright censorship against their critics and political opponents. Last September, the military sought to intimidate the directors of several

antiwar films. Navy deputy chief of staff Sarath Weerasekera, then military spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratnayaka and an air force officer met the directors and criticised them for undermining morale. They demanded that pro-military films be made and threatened “grave consequences if war breaks out.”

During his police interview last Monday, *Sunday Leader* editor Lasanthe Wickrematunga was told that he should be ready for further investigations. The fact that the police, at the urging of the JVP and JHU, are pressing ahead with the trumped up charges against the newspaper is one more indication that the government is preparing for far reaching attacks on democratic rights as the precursor to war.



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